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LAKE MISTASSINI.

BY

GEORGE C. HURLBUT.

THIS lake is first mentioned by Father Charles Albanel, S. J., who discovered it in 1672, in his voyage, begun on the Saguenay River and continued beyond the portages across the lake and down Rupert's River to James Bay.

Father Albanel's account is in these words : " On the 18th (June) we entered this great Lake of the Mistassirinins, which is held to be so large that to go round it takes twenty days of fine weather. The Lake takes its name from the rocks that fill it, which are of a prodigious size. There is a number of very beautiful islands with plenty of game and fish of every kind ; and elks, bears, caribous, porcupines and beavers are there in abundance. We had already made six leagues through the islands which break it up, when I beheld as it were a height of land from as far off as the eye could reach ; and I asked our people if it was towards that place that we were to go ? ' Hush ! ' said our guide to me, ' do not look at it, if thou wouldst not perish.' The Savages of all those regions imagine that whoever wishes to cross this Lake must carefully avoid any curiosity in looking at this course and, in particular, at the place where he is to land ; the mere sight of it, they

say, causes the disturbance of the waters and rouses tempests that chill the very boldest with terror." *

Father Albanel reports no more, and Michaux, who saw the lake in 1792, made no survey.

His account is given by Hind, *Explorations in Labrador, Vol. II.*, pp. 147-148, in the following words :

" Leaving Lake St. John, he ascended the Mistassinni River, or Rivière des Sables, 150 miles long and navigable for canoes to a distance of 120 miles from its mouth. Here he met with a cascade 80 feet in height ; and from the summit of the hills near the cascade, a chain of lakes occupying a long valley leads to the dividing ridge, where a little tributary of Lake Mistassinni takes its rise and forms the canoe route. Early in September the cold on the Height of Land was severe, and snow fell. On the 4th of the month, Michaux arrived at Lake Mistassinni.

" This vast lake, little known except to the servants of the old Nor' West Company, occupies an area between the 71st and 74th degrees of longitude, and beneath the 51st parallel. It discharges itself into Hudson's Bay by

* Le 18. nous entrâmes dans ce grand Lac des Mistassirinins, qu'on tient estre si grand, qu'il faut vingt jours de beau temps pour en faire le tour ; ce Lac tire son nom des rochers dont il est remply, qui sont d'une prodigieuse grosseur ; il y a quantité de tres-belles Isles, du gibier, et du poisson de toute espece ; les orignaux, les ours, les caribous, le porc-épic, et les castors y sont en abondance. Nous avions déjà fait six lieuës au travers des Isles qui l'entrecourent, quand j'aperceus comme une éminence de terre, d'aussi loin que la veuë se peut estendre ; je demanday à nos gens, si c'estoit vers cet endroit qu'il nous falloit aller ?

Tais-toy, me dit nostre guide, ne le regarde point, si tu ne veux perir. Les Sauvages de toutes ces contrées s'imaginent, que quiconque veut traverser ce Lac se doit soigneusement garder de la curiosité de regarder cette route, et principalement le lieu où l'on doit aborder ; son seul aspect, disent-ils, cause l'agitation des eaux, et forme des tempestes qui font transir de frayeur les plus asseurez.

Relation de la Nouvelle France, en l'Année 1672, p. 49.

Relations des Jésuites, Vol. III., Québec, 1858.

Rupert's River. . . . In Michaux's manuscript notes the following description of the Mistassinni country is given : In the neighborhood of Hudson's Bay and the great Lake Mistassinni, the trees which, some degrees farther south, form the mass of the forest, have almost entirely disappeared in this latitude, in consequence of the severity of the winters and the sterility of the soil. The whole country is cut up by thousands of lakes, and covered with enormous rocks piled one on the top of the other, which are often carpeted with large lichens of a black color, and which increase the sombre aspect of these desert and almost uninhabitable regions. It is in the spaces between the rocks that one finds a few pines (*Pinus rupestris*), which attain an altitude of three feet, and even at this small height show signs of decay. However, 150 miles farther south, this tree acquires a better and stronger growth, but it never rises higher than eight or ten feet." Besides the pine, Michaux mentions the following trees and plants: the dwarf birch (*betula nana*), juniper bushes, wild gooseberries, the Indian tea (*Ledum palustre*), and some species of blackberries. It is only of late years that exploration has been attempted.

The earliest delineation is by Franquelin in his "Carte de la Louisiane ou de Voyages du Sr. de la Salle et des pays qu'il a découverts depuis la Nouvelle France jusqu' au Golfe Mexique les années 1679, 80, 81 et 82, par Jean Baptiste Louis Franquelin, l'an 1684, Paris."

This map is described by Mr. Parkman (*Discovery of the Great West*, pp. 410, 411), and after him by Mr. H. Harrisse, in his *Notes sur la Nouvelle France*, No. 222. The original MS. map was in the Archives of the

Dépôt de la Marine, at Paris, but has disappeared. A copy, made in 1856, is in the Parliament Library at Ottawa. It is to this copy, no doubt, that Mr. E. E. Taché, Ass't Commissioner of Crown Lands, Quebec, refers when he says* that "it gives a rather imperfect indication of this lake, which he (Franquelin) calls

* In the following letter to Mr. Francis A. Stout, of this Society. It is apparently by a slip of the pen that Mr. Taché makes the date of Franquelin's map 1688.

QUEBEC, October 1, 1888.

FRANCIS A. STOUT, ESQ., VICE PREST. "AM. GEO. SOCIETY,"
29th street, New York City.

Sir:—In answer to your inquiry of the 3d ult., I beg to inform you that the "Great Lake Mistassini," respecting which a number of fanciful articles have lately been published, in certain American and Canadian journals, has been known for a long time, having been discovered in 1672 by the Rev. Père Albanel, S. J. A trading post was established upon it by the French about the end of the seventeenth century.

Franquelin, in his manuscript map of New France, dated 1688, gives a rather imperfect indication of this lake which he calls "Tamagamingue," a name properly belonging to a much less important lake in the neighborhood.

On a map of the region lying between Quebec and Hudson Bay, drawn by the Rev. Père Laure, S. J., in 1731, "Mistassini" is well represented. This manuscript map, which contains very many details and is drawn with great accuracy for the time, forms a part of the archives of the Ministry of Marine at Paris, and is reproduced in the collection of copies made by the late P. L. Morin for the library of the Federal Parliament.

The work of Père Charlevoix includes a map of the geographer Bellin, published in 1744, in which appear all the data given by Père Laure.

These maps, however, not being based upon any regular measurements, cannot be considered very correct. The first geodetic survey of Lake Mistassini was begun in 1873, by Mr. Richardson, of the Geological Commission.

In 1884, Mr. John Bignell, P. L. S., was placed at the head of an important exploring party, with instructions to minutely survey this great lake; but, through difficulties which arose between him and the party in charge of the geological branch of this exploration, he was obliged to abandon the work.

Mr. Lowe afterwards was entrusted with the expedition, and the result of his studies and researches are to be found in the reports of the Geological Commission of the Dominion of Canada for the year 1885.

The French fort called "des Dorval," according to Father Laure, stood at the outlet of "Little Mistassini" into "Great Mistassini." Mr. Bignell, jr., thinks that remains of this fort can be found.

Roberval never was at Lake Mistassini; there is not, at least, any historical record of such fact.

I have the honor to be, Sir,

Your Most Obed't Serv't

E. E. TACHE,

Asst. Commr. of Crown Lands.

N. B.—Herewith enclosed, I transmit you a tracing of that part of Father Laure's map indicating Lake Mistassini and the country surrounding.

‘Tamagamingue,’ a name properly belonging to a much less important lake in the neighborhood.”



LAKE MISTASSINI.

From a copy of the Map by Père Laure, S. J. (1731), in the Library of the Canadian Parliament. The original is in the Archives of the Ministry of Marine, Paris.

The Dépôt de la Marine possesses a MS. map of the country between Quebec and Hudson Bay drawn by Father Laure, S. J., in 1731. The portion of this map

relating to Lake Mistassini is here reproduced from a tracing courteously furnished by Mr. Taché.

In 1870 Mr. James Richardson, of the Canadian Geological Survey, was charged with the exploration of the country to the northward of Lake St. John. He made a survey of thirty miles along Lake Mistassini; but provisions failed, and he was obliged to leave the work unfinished. It was taken up the following year by Mr. Walter McOuat, who says, in his report :

“We measured on this lake a coast line of about a hundred and fifty miles, including no bays less than a mile in width. The main body of the lake was found to be of a very elongated form. . . . A series of long narrow islands, which were seen only from a distance, extends for many miles apparently parallel with the longer axis of the lake. We carried our measurements for about seventy miles from the extreme south-west point. As no land was visible from this position, looking in a north-easterly direction . . . the whole length of the lake cannot be much, if any, less than a hundred miles.”

For a surveyor, charged with official duties, Mr. McOuat is less precise than he might be, and Father Albanel's guide himself could not have been more careful to leave things as they were. The dread of the lake tempests seems to have lasted till 1884. In this year an expedition was sent out under Mr. John Bignell, P. L. S., to make :

1st. A thorough survey, hydrographical and topographical, of Lake Mistassini, especially of the northern and eastern portions not examined or surveyed by the Geological Survey parties under Messrs. Richardson and McOuat, in 1870-71.

2nd. A geological examination of the lake shore and of as much of the adjacent country as may be practicable.

3rd. A collection of specimens, vegetable, mineral and animal, illustrating the resources of the region.

This expedition, organized jointly by the Canadian Geological Survey and the Quebec Department of Crown Lands, met with only a partial success, Mr. John Bignell having been unable, "on account of some unfortunate misunderstanding, to carry out more than a certain part of the duty which had been assigned to him." * In his detailed report to the Commissioner, Mr. Bignell is silent on the subject of the misunderstanding.

He arrived with his party at the Little Mistassini on the 13th December and, continuing down the lake till the 19th, sent two Indians ahead to the Hudson Bay Co's Post for supplies. These men were met returning on the 21st.

On the 23d the party was met, when a few miles from the Post, by Mr. Wm. Miller, the gentleman in charge, attended by a number of his employees. The Post is a cluster of four or five buildings, including the Co's store. Here Mr. Miller has resided with his wife and family for a number of years, in a house furnished with the comforts of civilized life; and at the time of Mr. Bignell's visit, he was about erecting a small chapel. Some of his employees are also married men. The Post is supplied from Rupert's House on James Bay, to which Mr. Miller makes a visit once a year in June, with the furs that have been collected.

* Report of the Commissioner of Crown Lands of the Province of Quebec for the twelve months ended 30th June, 1885.

According to Mr. Bignell, good potatoes and other vegetables are raised, although the land has been cropped over and over again for many years, without ever having been enriched.

The Eskimo dogs, of which there are many at the Post, are employed in the winter for drawing the year's supply of wood for fuel, and in visiting the nets, some of which are set at a distance. These dogs are fed on fish in the winter, and in the summer forage for themselves.

The temperature at Mistassini runs to extremes. The thermometer often marks 50° or 60° below zero (Fah.) in winter, but the air is very dry. The snow-fall is heavy and ice forms to the depth of six feet. The bays are frozen in October or November; the great lake not till January, and the ice breaks up at the end of May or the middle of June. The summers are very hot, with frequent thunder-storms.

Fur-bearing animals, particularly beaver, otter, marten and black bear, are numerous; and the lakes abound with trout, jackfish, whitefish, pickerel, carp, and the "maria," a fish resembling the cod.

He visited the Marble Cave, marked on Father Laure's map, and found that it contained two rooms, the outer one about 18 ft. wide and 16 deep, with a roof 8 ft. high, the inner one 10 ft. deep, 8 ft. wide and 6 ft. high. The walls were of spar.

Mr. Bignell remained for several weeks at the Hudson Bay Co's Post, at Mistassini; and he makes the following remarkable statements as to the size of the Lake: "A very intelligent Indian, to whom I spoke on the subject, told me that some years ago he had met with an old Indian who informed him that from what he

knew, and from what he had heard, he thought that a good walker, carrying nothing but what he required for the trip, could in the spring, on the crust, go from end to end of the Lake in ten days. Now under these circumstances, as fifty or sixty miles per day would be considered but moderate, we may form an approximate idea of the extent of this Lake, and if we accept only half of this estimate, we may still call the Lake an immense one. The general opinion was that it could not be scaled around in less than one summer."

Mr. Bignell's faith is worthy of Sancho Panza's friend: "And he who told me this declared that it was so true that I might swear I myself had seen it." Stronger testimony could not be; but the Commissioner of Crown Lands accepts as final the plan of the Grand Lake Mistassini prepared by Mr. Low, of the Geological Survey.

"As I anticipated," says the Commissioner, "this sheet of water is not of the extraordinary dimensions assigned to it by certain parties from the exaggerated accounts which had reached them. Its extreme length is not more than ninety-five miles, nor its greatest breadth more than fifteen." If the "certain parties" are the intelligent Indian and Mr. Bignell, they have a grievance; for the document, which records their belief in the immensity of the Lake, is printed without correction as Appendix No. 38 to the Report of the Commissioner.

Mr. A. P. Low, B. Ap. Sc., who made the survey of Mistassini, was at first charged with the geological portion of the joint exploration. He tells, in his Report to the Director of the Geological and Natural History Survey,* that, while at the Hudson Bay Co.'s Post, he

* Part D, Annual Report, 1885.

had several disagreements with Mr. Bignell and found it necessary to go to Ottawa. He returned with instructions to take charge of the party. He began his survey where Mr. McOuat had left off on the west side, continued it to the north end and thence back down the east side, "connecting again with McOuat's survey at the Big Narrows," at the upper end of Abatagush Bay. The distances were measured with a Rochon micrometer, the angles with a transit theodolite, and frequent observations for latitude were made with the sextant as a check on the scaling. The work was done in nineteen days.

Mr. Low's report must be accepted, though it does not meet the requirements of a "thorough survey, hydrographical and topographical." The Lake is described as a long and narrow body of water stretching from N.E. to S.W., with a perceptible curve between the ends, the concavity of the curve being toward the S.E. It lies between N. Lat. 50° and $51^{\circ} 24'$, W. Long. $72^{\circ} 45'$ to $74^{\circ} 20'$.

The length is said to be *nearly* one hundred miles. At one place the Lake is very deep, "an isolated sounding, made in crossing, having given 374 feet at a point which, *I was informed*, was not the deepest part of the Lake."

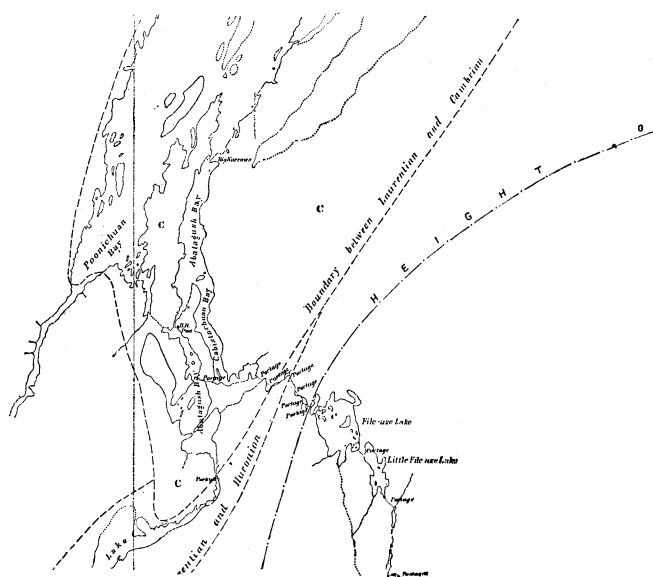
Poonichaun Bay,* which lies W. of Abatagush Bay, "continues in a south-westerly course for a long distance, *as the end was not reached* after ascending it fourteen miles. *The Indians say that a large river empties into the Lake at the head of this bay.*"

The italicized expressions do not inspire confidence

* Spelled *Poonichuan* on the Map.

in the results of Mr. Low's exploration; and there is work yet to be done before a true map of Lake Mistassini can be made.

That so little has been known of the Lake is the more surprising, seeing that the Hudson Bay Company have



LOWER END OF LAKE MISTASSINI.

From the Map in the Report of the Geological and Natural History Survey of Canada. Part D., 1885.

had a trading post on its shores for over one hundred years. "This post," says Mr. Low, "was first situated near the outlet, but owing to the difficulty in procuring an adequate supply of fish, the staple article of food, the post was removed, over fifty years ago, to its present position on the south-east bay. During the time of the North-west Trading Company, they also had a trading

post at the southern end of the south-east bay."* As to the climate Mr. Low says, on p. 16 of his Report, that the summer is shorter and colder on the main body of the lake than in the vicinity of the post. Where the trees were at all dense the low lands bordering the lake were frozen solid within a foot of the surface during the month of July. The Hudson Bay Post is the best point for agriculture, and here a poor crop of potatoes is raised yearly, the tops being always frozen before they mature. In the spring, as soon as the frost was out of the ground, Mr. Low sowed garden peas, beans, corn and turnips. On August 20th the peas were beginning to fill the pods, the beans were in flower, and the corn was eighteen inches above the ground; the turnips alone were growing nicely.

* *Geological and Natural History Survey of Canada, p. 13, Part D, Annual Report, 1885.*